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SUBJECT: MUBARAK VISIT LEAVES GOF REASSURED OF EGYPT'S
SUPPORT ON SYRIA/LEBANON

REF: PARIS 40

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: In the wake of the January 4 Mubarak-Chirac meeting, GoF contacts described Chirac and Mubarak as on the "same line" on Syria/Lebanon, and concluded that Egypt remains firm in its commitment to press Syria to cooperate with UNIIIC. Mubarak and Chirac agreed that Bashar al-Asad must comply with the UNIIIC interview request, though he may be given "special accommodation" based on his head of state status. (Such accommodations, according to MFA and Elysee contacts, could involve the interview taking place in Damascus, or Asad answering questions in writing, subject to UNIIIC approval.) Mubarak confirmed Egyptian willingness to consider a GOL request to help reorganize the Lebanese security services; EGIS Chief Solaiman will travel to Damascus shortly to inform the SARG before traveling to Beirut to explore options. Chirac cautioned Solaiman not to give the impression in Beirut that he is acting as an intermediary for Syria and make clear GOE support for Lebanon and PM Siniora. On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, EGIS Chief Solaiman reviewed challenges facing PA President Abbas, while Chirac called for Fatah to improve its corrupt image in Europe by embracing reform. Mubarak was extremely negative on Iraq with President Chirac, and even more so during a separate January 4 meeting with PM Villepin, whom the Egyptian president praised for his UNSC Iraq stance in 2003. Mubarak also addressed Iran with the French PM, advising continued patience and negotiations, and warning against direct confrontation with Tehran. The Villepin discussion also addressed Israeli-Palestinian issues, with Mubarak offering praise for PM Sharon (before his illness), and briefly addressed Darfur, about which Mubarak criticized U.S. and UK policy. MFA contacts confirmed that the GoF did not raise the Ayman Nour case during the Mubarak discussions, describing this as a human rights concern not rising to the level of a presidential visit. End summary.

2. (C) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak visited Paris January 4-5, and met separately with President Chirac and PM Villepin January 4. We discussed the visit from MFA-DAS equivalent for Egypt/Levant Herve Besancenot January 5 and with Presidential Middle East advisor Dominique Boche January 6. The Mubarak-Chirac meeting, as expected (reftel), focused principally on Syria/Lebanon and began with a one-on-one discussion, for which our GoF contacts had no readout. In a larger group working lunch which included the French and Egyptian FM's and EGIS Chief Omar Solaiman, Chirac and Mubarak further addressed Syria/Lebanon, as well as Israeli-Palestinian issues, Iraq, and the 2004 Sharm al Sheikh charter plane crash in which 133 French tourists perished. The Villepin meeting, which came at Mubarak's request, addressed Iraq, Israeli-Palestinian issues, Iran, and briefly touched on Darfur. The following reports discussions by topic:

COMMON FRENCH-EGYPTIAN APPROACH ON SYRIA/LEBANON

3. (C) According to Besancenot, Chirac emerged from the tete-a-tete with Mubarak and declared that he and Mubarak were "on the same line" on Syria/Lebanon: the international community must help UNIIIC complete its mission and punish those guilty of the Hariri assassination. Chirac and Mubarak agreed that Bashar al-Asad must comply with UNIIIC's request for questioning, though, as a head of state, Bashar could be afforded "different treatment," i.e. an interview in Damascus, and should be considered a witness, not suspect at this point. (Elysee Advisor Boche offered a slightly different interpretation of "different treatment," which he said could involve having Bashar answer UNIIIC questions in writing, vice a personal interview, subject to UNIIIC's approval.)

4. (C) Besancenot reported that Mubarak confirmed Egyptian willingness to consider a Lebanese request to help reorganize the Lebanese security services, conveyed during a Mubarak-Siniora meeting on the margins of the December OIC summit in Riyadh. Within the coming days, EGIS Chief Solaiman would go to Damascus to explain the potential Egyptian involvement; shortly thereafter, Solaiman would go

to Beirut to begin discussing options. In response, Chirac cautioned Solaiman to be careful during his Beirut trip, to closely coordinate with Siniora, and to be clear that he was there to help the GOL, not act as an intermediary for Damascus. Chirac added that the Lebanese public remained in a very fragile state of mind and would follow Solaiman's visit with great attention; while the Lebanese remained supportive of UNIIIC, they felt that the accountability process was proceeding too slowly while Syria continued to act with impunity, in the face of international indifference. As a result, Egypt must make clear its intention to support the Siniora government and help Lebanon. Presidential Advisor Boche welcomed the potential Egyptian assistance as a positive development, given that the Lebanese security capacity remained totally stripped of its capacity, in the wake of its long-standing subservience to Syria.

15. (C) Besancenot concluded that Mubarak was very clear and firm on Syria/Lebanon and was maintaining a line "very close" to that of the GoF. Mubarak remained fixated on stability, and stressed opposition to Syrian regime change. Chirac, in response, agreed that stability was important, as was getting to the truth of Hariri's assassination. The GoF's priority remained making sure that its "Arab brothers" impressed upon Bashar that he had no alternative but to cooperate; according to Besancenot and Boche, Mubarak reassured Chirac that he'll continue to do so.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ISSUES

16. (C) Besancenot noted that EGIS Chief Solaiman led the Chirac-Mubarak group discussion on Israeli-Palestinian issues. Solaiman described PA President Abbas as facing three major problems: 1) divisions in Fatah, which are leading to security chaos and the rise of Hamas, which Egypt was trying to keep as limited as possible; 2) the financial crisis, linked to the interruption in World Bank and EU programs; and 3) total absence of gestures from the Israeli side. Chirac responded that Fatah suffered from a corrupt image in Europe and must work to overcome this through reform. In the separate Villepin meeting, Mubarak described PM Sharon as a "real leader," who speaks frankly and acts decisively. (Discussion took place before Sharon's January 4 hospitalization.) Besancenot added that Mubarak credited Sharon with Gaza withdrawal, as well as Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon, a surprising historical slip. Mubarak also appealed to Villepin for greater European assistance and investment in the Palestinian territories.

DEEP PESSIMISM ON IRAQ

17. (C) Besancenot and Boche described Mubarak as uniformly negative on Iraq. According to Besancenot, Mubarak told Chirac he saw no solution to the Iraq crisis and predicted that the Arab League reconciliation effort would not succeed. Boche explained that Mubarak's pessimism on the Arab League reconciliation effort was due in large part to his view of the preparatory meeting in Cairo, at which Mubarak said he had to intervene personally to press the parties to reach minor agreements. Mubarak further advised Chirac that a continued U.S. troop presence in Iraq would increase terrorism and disorder, while a U.S. pullout would spur chaos and give Iran an open door to implant itself further in Iraq. Besancenot described Mubarak as harsher on Iraq with PM Villepin, whom the Egyptian president commended for his 2003 UNSC speech, which he said made Villepin "a hero" in the Arab world. Mubarak told Villepin he saw Iraq deteriorating into a Somalia-like situation, which it was too late to reverse. The Egyptian president further criticized the U.S. for failure to understand Iraqi history and excessive focus on fulfilling an artificial democratic process; Iraq needed a harsh, just leader, not a "democratic facade." (Comment: Neither Besancenot or Boche offered much detail on how Chirac or Villepin responded to Mubarak on Iraq; the Elysee press release on the visit struck a relatively constructive tone, and noted Chirac's (not Mubarak's) view that, "despite difficulties, the national reconciliation process must continue." End Comment.)

DON'T CONFRONT IRAN

18. (C) Besancenot reported that Mubarak cautioned Villepin that the international community should not confront Iran directly, due to Iran's capacity to create problems in Syria and Lebanon. Mubarak warned further against acting militarily against Iran, which he said will provoke an Iranian terrorist backlash. The best approach for the EU-3, in the GOE view, was to remain patient and continue negotiating with Tehran.

ANTI-U.S./UK DIG ON DARFUR

19. (C) Besancenot added that the Villepin-Mubarak discussion briefly touched on Darfur, after the French PM asked Mubarak to assess North Africa developments. Mubarak responded by criticizing the U.S. and UK positions on Darfur, which he viewed as further destabilizing the situation in Sudan.

NO AYMAN NOUR DISCUSSION

10. (C) Besancenot confirmed that the GoF did not raise the Ayman Nour case with Mubarak. Besancenot explained that human the GoF maintained a distinction between its human rights concerns and political agenda with the GOE, concluding that the issue did not raise to the level of a presidential visit. During a Chirac-Mubarak discussion in 2005, Besancenot recounted, Mubarak expressed annoyance with Western support for Nour, whom Chirac admitted he had never heard of. Besancenot, who served most recently as the French DCM in Cairo, added that although the GoF had concerns about the length and conditions of Nour's detention, it had "doubts" about Nour's character, notably his questionable finances, past fraud accusations, and murky base of Islamist support. Besancenot concluded that there were other secular, "new generation" oppositionists whom the GoF found much preferable to Nour, such as figures in the Wafd party and "Tajammu" movement.

COMMENT

11. (C) The Mubarak visit fulfilled the GOF's priority objective on Syria/Lebanon: keeping Arab governments (namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia) on board and at the forefront of international efforts to compel Syrian cooperation with its UN obligations. The downside of such a consensus-driven approach by the GoF remains a tendency to water down more forceful UN action, as was observed during the negotiations of UNSCR 1644. On non-Lebanon issues, we were struck by the depth of Mubarak's pessimism on Iraq, which GoF contacts told us was consistent with past GOF-GoE exchanges. The degree to which the GoF continues to receive accolades from Arab governments for its unhelpful past positions on Iraq may make it all the more difficult to press France towards greater engagement in Iraq. End comment.

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